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LABOR IN  
THE LONGEST REIGN

SIDNEY WEBB

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# LABOUR IN THE LONGEST REIGN

1837-1897

BY  
SIDNEY WEBB

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LONDON: GRANT RICHARDS  
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1897

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# THE NEW ANNUAL POLITICS IN 1896

WITH CONTRIBUTIONS BY

H. D. TRAILL, H. W. MASSINGHAM,  
G. BERNARD SHAW, G. W. STEEVENS,  
H. W. WILSON, ROBERT DONALD,  
And others

*Morning Post*.—"Not only does it constitute a handy work of reference that, besides merely enumerating the political events of the past year, shows also the light in which they are regarded by various shades of public opinion, but it calls for appreciation as a record of the development of political thought, that, if regularly issued, will be of value to the future historian. Further, by its summaries of the political progress of 1896 from different points of view, the book has attractions for those who wish to understand the various ideas actuating contending Parties, and such readers will certainly find entertaining matter in the several contributions."

Mr. KEIR HARDIE in the *Labour Leader*.—"Those who can afford it, which includes at least every Labour Club, ought to possess a copy for their library."

GENERAL



## LABOUR IN THE LONGEST REIGN<sup>1</sup>

THE "Sixty Years' Reign" of Queen Victoria—1837 to 1897—inevitably produces a crop of comparisons between the condition of the people at the two dates. At first sight, nothing is more conducive to our self-complacency.

If the Chartists, in 1837, had called for a comparison of their time with 1787, and had obtained a fair account of the actual social life of the ordinary working man at the two periods, it is almost certain that they would have recorded a positive de-

<sup>1</sup> Reprinted (by permission), with numerous alterations, from the Wholesale Co-operative Society's *Annual* for 1893.



cline in the standard of life of large classes of the population. And if the Spenceans or the "Corresponding Societies" of 1787 had compiled a trustworthy comparison of that year with 1737, it is probable they must have marked a similar decline. There seems reason to believe, indeed, that in 1837 some large sections of the "dim inarticulate multitude" were struggling in the trough of a century's decline in all that makes life worth living. Whatever had been of advantage in the patriarchal or semi-feudal relationship between social classes had passed away, without yet being succeeded by the political freedom and mutual respect of democratic organization. The industrial independence which marked the hand industry had been in great part lost, whilst the advantages of the factory system were as yet not universally developed. The poor had lost the generous laxity of the old Poor Law without having yet gained the bracing education in inde-



pendence which was the main advantage of the new. The parochial and manorial systems of local administration had, in many places, broken down under the enormous growth of population and industry, while the new municipalities were but beginning, and public sanitation and public education were unknown.<sup>1</sup> And whilst the worst horrors of industrial anarchy prevailed in the mills and mines, not yet subject to any effective legislation, the workman found his food rendered artificially dear by the remnants of the protective system. In almost every respect, indeed, the wage-earner in 1837 was suffering from the surviving evils of the old order, whilst losing all its advantages ;

<sup>1</sup> Lord Beaconsfield's novel, *Sybil, or The Two Nations*, gives a good idea of some of the horrors of this period, as Mrs. Gaskell's *Mary Barton* does of the poverty of Lancashire. Engels' *Condition of the Working Classes in 1844* (Sonnenschein, 1892) is a contemporary picture largely compiled from official reports.

and he was already exposed to many of the disadvantages of the new era, whilst enjoying but few of its benefits. Nothing is more difficult than to estimate fairly the comparative well-being of the whole community at different periods. But if one may trust one's impression of numerous converging testimonies, 1737 shows approximately the high-water mark of prosperity, at any rate since the Middle Ages, of the farm labourers and perhaps also of the little handicraftsmen. Their life, no doubt, was then rude and hard, but it had, perhaps, with its yearly bonds and customary wages, more permanence and regularity on the whole than has since been possible. On the other hand, 1837 marks almost the lowest depth of degradation of the English rural population, and a very low level indeed in the condition of the miner and the mill operative. And, therefore, even if 1897 represents a great advance in almost every

respect on 1837, we cannot accept this result with any very great self-complacency. In comparing ourselves with 1837 we set an appallingly low standard, and great indeed would be our guilt if amid our huge increase in national wealth no advance on that year were recorded.

It is not possible here to attempt a full examination into the condition of the workman of to-day as compared with his position in 1837. All that can be done is to give a general impression on the subject, and a few of the many detailed facts which could be cited in support of that impression.<sup>1</sup> Bad as we are sometimes

<sup>1</sup> The Queen's Jubilee in 1887 produced a number of "Fifty Years' Retrospects," to which reference should be made by those studying the subject. Of these, Sir Robert Giffen's two essays on "The Progress of the Working Classes during the last half-century" (in his *Essays in Finance*, second series, 1887), contain the best survey of the economic facts, presented in a somewhat too optimistic way. Mulhall's *Fifty Years of National Progress*

tempted to think the present condition of the people, it is clear that, on the whole, there has been a substantial advance since 1837. In the great mass of trades, and in nearly all places, the money wages of the men are much higher, and the workman obtains a far larger supply of commodities in return for his labour than he did sixty years ago. In many cases the hours of labour are shorter, the conditions of work are better, and the general standard of life has been considerably raised. The house accommodation, both in town and country, is much improved ; the sanitary conditions

contains a mass of statistics. A more general survey is taken in Sir W. Besant's *Fifty Years Ago* (Chatto & Windus), which contains a mass of interesting particulars as to the social condition of the nation, but is untrustworthy upon economic facts. *The History of Trade Unionism*, by S. and B. Webb, tells the story of the working classes ; see also *The Tailoring Trade*, edited for the London School of Economics and Political Science by F. W. Galton (Longmans).

have often been revolutionized ; education is not only far more general, but is also far more extensive ; whilst such opportunities for culture as libraries, museums, art galleries, music and healthy recreation are much more accessible to the workman than they ever were before. In a word, the great bulk of the population are far more civilized than they were sixty years ago. Cruel as is our industrial system, life in England is in nearly every respect much more humane than it was. The evils which still exist must not blind us to the progress that has been made. So far the panegyrics of the optimistic statisticians of our time are justified.

### **Wages.**

It is unnecessary to say very much about the general rise in money wages which has taken place since 1837. There seems no reason to doubt, *so far as concerns the male*



*worker*, the general accuracy of Sir Robert Giffen's conclusion that the rise in nearly all trades has been from 50 to 100 per cent.<sup>1</sup> In some of the building trades, for instance, wages have in certain localities actually doubled during the present century. The son of a carpenter in Scotland told me that he remembered his father, about 1850, regularly bringing home 34s. 6d. as his wage—not for one, but for four weeks' work, the system of monthly pays not yet having been abolished. It is true that this was in the neighbourhood of Inverness, but I mention the incident to recall the fact that wages have often risen most in obscure nooks and corners of the

<sup>1</sup> See Sir Robert Giffen's two papers on "The Progress of the Working Classes in the last half-century" (*Essays in Finance*, second series, 1887, pp. 365-409). But it must be remembered that this general rise has not taken place without numerous ups and downs in good and bad times, the details of which for particular trades and in particular localities would well repay study.

land which have been opened up by those great levellers of wages and prices—railways and the postal system. But even in Glasgow the minutes of the energetic Joiners' Union show that it was fighting hard between 1833 and 1837 to get a standard rate of 21s. per week, as against 36s. at the present day. The stone-masons in Glasgow have improved their rate of pay from 5*d.* per hour in 1853, which is the earliest year for which I could obtain the figures, to 8½*d.* per hour now. And if we turn to quite another industry, I have ascertained the rate of wages of the engine-men at a small colliery in the Lothians since the year 1831. They began at 11s. per week, and rise steadily, though with numerous fluctuations, to 23*s.* 4*d.* in 1872, and to no less than 33*s.* 3*d.* per week in 1892.

The compositors, too, in many places have doubled their money wages during the present century. In Edinburgh, for



instance, in 1803 the average earnings of compositors in eleven of the best printing offices of the city varied from 13s. 9d. to 17s. 11½d. per week, the rate being 3½d. per 1,000. The "Interlocutor" of 1805—an order of the Court of Session fixing a scale of piecework rates—raised the average earnings to about 20s. 3d.; but from that time until 1861 no advance was made on these rates, and the average earnings of men at piecework in book printing establishments seem positively to have declined during these years. But in the meantime the "stab" system had greatly increased in the city, and "stab" wages had risen from 21s. in 1833 to 26s. in 1861. Edinburgh has never been a good city for compositors, but the rate per 1,000 is now 6¾d., and the minimum weekly wage of men on the establishment is 32s. 6d.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> It may be added that the method of computing piecework per 1,000 ens is said to have been introduced in London in 1774, when the rate was 4d.

But perhaps one of the most remarkable instances of improvement of social condition is that of the Northumberland coal miner. Two generations ago he was a helpless, degraded wage-slave, utterly without the means of resisting the worst abuses of capitalist tyranny. The hewer of 1830, if we may trust a contemporary pamphlet, often received no more than 11s. or 12s. a week for ten or twelve hours a day underground. The miners' delegate meeting settled the strike of 1831 on terms which included a minimum of 30s. per fortnight for twelve hours a day.<sup>1</sup> But the miner was constantly cheated in the weight of

(Edinburgh being 3*d.* at that time). By 1785 the London rate had advanced to 5½*d.*, where it appears to have remained stationary until 1861, when it was raised to 6*d.* It now averages 8½*d.*

<sup>1</sup> See *An Appeal to the Public from the Pitmen*. Delegates' meeting, Newcastle, 6th May, 1831; reprinted in the Appendix to Fynes' *Miners of Northumberland and Durham* (Blyth, 1873); see *The History of Trade Unionism*, p. 110.

coal drawn, and in the food and other commodities that he was compelled to buy at his employer's "tommy-shop." Spasmodic rebellions resulted in particular martyrdoms, without producing either any durable combination or any appreciable improvement in the miner's lot. His "yearly bond," enforced by ruthless magistrates, kept him in a position little better than serfdom, whilst the utter absence of any provision for education seemed to leave no ray of hope for any uplifting of his class. Now the Northumberland miner stands in the very front rank of what is often not inappropriately termed the aristocracy of labour. A strong and admirably led Trade Union defends him both from the employer's tyranny and the accidental fluctuations of earnings which arise from the changing character of the "face" of the mine. He has secured effective legislative protection against fraud, and, to no small extent, against the avoid-

able dangers of his calling. He works hard, but his labour is concentrated into fewer hours, so as to leave him leisure for public and private affairs.

It would be in the highest degree instructive to study in detail the means by which this beneficent revolution has been accomplished. It is very significant that the Northumberland miners were unable to form any durable Trade Union until the Mines Regulation Act of 1842 had given them some protection from the worst abuses of competition, and that the strength and efficiency of their union has grown in direct proportion to the amount of legislative regulation which the union has been able to procure for their industry. A similar remark might be made concerning the spread of co-operation among them. The Northumberland pitmen appear, indeed, to present an almost perfect example of the manner in which every form of well-devised collective action,

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whether legislative regulation, Trade Union control, or consumers' co-operation, act and react one upon the other to the permanent elevation of the standard of life.

The splendid progress of the North-umberland coal-hewers has been shared in greater or less degree by many other classes ; but it is unnecessary to dwell further upon this side of the question. It will not, I think, be generally disputed that the last sixty years have seen a very great advance in the condition of a very large part of the people. But it is essential to notice the fact that this great advance in prosperity, this great rise in the standard of life, has not been universal. There are living in our midst to-day considerable masses of people who, as regards their economic circumstances, are still in 1837. I have already referred to the difficulty of comparing with any accuracy the general condition of the people at one period with that of another, but there



is one datum line which remains pretty constant, and that is the level of mere subsistence. If we find any class existing just at this subsistence level, we may feel quite sure that no great improvement can have taken place in its condition ; and if we discover in our midst classes who do not even manage to get enough for durable subsistence—who live, to use Mr. Charles Booth's phrase, "in a state of chronic want"—we may be certain that the lot of these classes can, by the nature of things, never have been any worse even in 1837. Mr. Charles Booth tells us,<sup>1</sup> in the effective "eloquence unadorned" of his columns of statistics, that some 32 per cent. of the whole four millions of London's population fall within his four classes of "poverty," earning not more than a guinea per week per family. It is difficult to believe that, even in 1837, the percentage of persons at a corresponding low

<sup>1</sup> See *Life and Labour of the People*, vols. i. to iv.

level can have been greater. It is practically certain, remembering the great increase in the total population, that at no previous time were the actual numbers more than at present. It has been reserved for our own prosperous time to produce the spectacle of over a million of people within one city living "in poverty." And when we examine closer into Mr. Booth's appalling details, and begin to realize that out of this huge residuum nearly a third are actually below what can be called even full subsistence for a London family, we shall begin to feel that our boasted progress since 1837 has not, after all, taken us very far. The 300,000 Londoners who fail to get even 18s. a week per family, and live in "chronic want," can never have been poorer. Their actual number in the much smaller city of 1837 cannot have been so great. And if we take into account the slums of our other great cities, and realize that we have in



our midst a class of at least a million persons, besides the million at any one time in receipt of Poor Law relief, who live in "chronic want" of even the necessities of life, we shall begin to understand how very partial after all has been our progress.

It is often assumed that this huge residuum which is existing in our midst at starvation wages is made up entirely of unskilled labourers, women plying the needle, and drunkards and wastrels of all kinds. But this is not the case. The unskilled labourer, indeed, is morally entitled to full subsistence, though he does not always get it; but even men with a trade are sometimes little better off. We find to-day numerous small classes of skilled craftsmen in large towns whose weekly earnings do not amount to £1 a week. The Sheffield fork-grinders, for instance, working at a horribly unhealthy and laborious trade, are constantly found

working at time-work for 16s. to 20s. for a full week of fifty-six hours, subject to considerable reductions for lost time. Similarly the Sheffield table-blade grinders, who do the common work, do not get more than a guinea a week net when working full time. Even in the comparatively prosperous textile industries there are large classes of men working as weavers, card-room operatives, etc., who do not make £1 a week. Consider, too, the wages which our civilization allots to adult able-bodied women. It is difficult to believe that the "shilling a day" wages of unskilled women in the East End of London, the 6s. to 7s. a week earned by the Belfast rope-maker or tobacco-worker, or even the 10s. or 12s. earned at piece-work by the skilled linen-weaver or Glasgow cotton mill operative, represents any appreciable advance on the scale of the past generation. Women's wages for unskilled labour still gravitate, as a rule,

pretty close to the subsistence level, below which they can never have sunk for any length of time.<sup>1</sup> Out of the four millions of women who are working for wages at the present time, a very large percentage must be earning practically no better subsistence than their grandmothers did. It is at least doubtful whether any previous age could show so large a total number at this low level. And if we might sum up in one general impression the different facts as to comparative wages, we should, I think, have to come to this conclusion: Whilst the skilled male craftsman has largely increased his income, and a practically new class of responsible and fairly well-paid labourers and machine-minders has come into existence, there exists now

<sup>1</sup> For statistics of women's wages—scarcely mentioned by Sir R. Giffen—see an article by the present writer in the *Economic Journal*, December, 1891; and *Studies in Economics*, by Professor W. Smart (London, 1895).

a greater sum, though a smaller proportion, of hopeless destitution than at any previous time. It appears at any rate highly probable that in 1897 there are positively more people in Great Britain who are existing at or near starvation wages than there were in 1837, although their number bears a smaller proportion to the whole.

It must not, of course, be forgotten that prices are not the same now as in 1837. The workman pays much more in rent than he did then, not only on account of the positive rise of rent, but also because a far larger proportion of the total population now live and work in towns. Meat too, and milk, with a few other articles, are dearer. But I see no reason to doubt the statistical conclusion that prices are on the whole lower than in 1837. The reduction in the price of bread is worth more to the agricultural labourer or to the family at a sheer subsistence level in London than any alteration in the price of meat. The rise

in rent is a real and most serious deduction from the increase of wages, and is no doubt a great cause of the destitution of the urban residuum. The proportion of the income which is paid away for rent is, of course, greatest in the very poorest class, and this accordingly suffers most from the rise. But it is far from being equal to the advance in the money wages of the skilled artisan, whose weekly earnings certainly procure for himself and his family a considerably larger share of comfort and civilization than could have been commanded by his grandfather. My conclusion is that, on the whole, wages are not only higher but are also worth more than they were before. On the other hand, the increased cost of rent, and meat and milk, presses with undue severity upon the helpless poor of our great cities, and does much to keep their condition down to the old bad level.

### **Irregularity of Employment.**

But it would be misleading to consider only the rate of wages without paying at least equal attention to the extent to which the workman is irregularly employed. The weekly earnings of a stone-mason, for instance, may run up to 36s. or 42s. for the time that he is in constant employment, but any estimate of his yearly income would be fallacious in the extreme if it did not take into account that he usually earns little or nothing during the winter months. We cannot, therefore, usefully compare rates of wages unless we at the same time endeavour to estimate whether employment has become more or less intermittent and irregular.

Now, on this point of comparative regularity of employment, we have at present practically no statistical information, and the most diverse accounts are given by different witnesses. If we were to believe





some of our friends, we should conclude that irregularity of employment was a new thing, the product of the competitive system in its decay, unknown to our forefathers. But whatever may have been the case in that semi-mythical golden age of the hand industry, it is quite certain that sixty years ago there were periods of bad trade and widespread lack of employment. Of this we find abundant evidence in all directions. It is unnecessary to do more than refer to the large number of persons who at that time received Poor Law relief. A better index to the chronic lack of employment in the winter months is given by the way in which the numbers in receipt of relief went up as soon as the cold weather set in. But evidence of another, and perhaps more trustworthy kind, is to be found in the records of the old Trade Unions. The skilled craftsman, earning good wages while at work, was then, as now, loth to throw himself on the parish, and some of



the early Trade Societies were formed largely with the object of providing maintenance for their members when out of work. Out-of-work pay, or, as it is sometimes expressively termed, "idle aliment," was, as far as I am aware, not given in 1837 by any Trade Union, but elaborate provisions were made to enable men who could not find employment in their town to go on tramp in search of it. "Tramp" had not then become a term of reproach, and the "tramps' room" was a regular feature of every public-house patronized by one of the larger Trade Societies.<sup>1</sup> The tramp had usually exhausted all his scanty funds before he made up his mind to wander, and it was therefore necessary to organize a regular system of daily relief

<sup>1</sup> The tramping system has not entirely died out, but most societies abandoned it between 1840 and 1870, generally substituting the present "home donation" in its place. See *History of Trade Unionism*.

all over the kingdom. Already before the middle of the eighteenth century, the wool-combers were associated from Tiverton to the Tees in a single widespread association for relieving their travelling members. Their example was followed within a few years by the wool-staplers, and long before 1824 the compositors also appear to have covered the land with a network of local societies, one of whose chief aims was the mutual relief of each other's tramps. The little society of ironmoulders, which started at Bolton in 1809, soon expanded into an organization of national extent with similar objects. The member "clear on the books" who was driven to travel, received a "clear card" which entitled him to a bed in the tramps' room and a shilling or so from the branch secretary at each of the society's branches on his route, until he came to a place where he found a job, or until he became "box-fast" and entitled to no more relief. It is needless to say that

in those days there were few railways, and practically no cheap means of transit. The tramp, therefore, invariably walked from stage to stage, exposed to all the inclemency of the weather, for he could receive no more than one day's allowance at each station, and the stations were often many miles apart. And so we find, for instance, the bookbinders enacting in 1835 that a member "whose shoes had become defective after travelling eighty miles with a document, could have them repaired at the Union's expense by obtaining an order from the local secretary of the town he was in to that effect."

Of the extent to which this tramping system was used little exact information can be obtained ; but the entries in the branch minute-books of this period show that a considerable number of *bonâ-fide* tramps were at all times on the road, and every now and then the complaints became frequent and loud of the large num-

bers of men arriving with cards from other towns, or leaving, furnished with the same credentials, in search of work elsewhere.

It would therefore be incorrect to assume that irregularity of employment is any new thing, or even that it is greater now than sixty years ago. The building trades were just as much checked by the cold weather then as now. The frozen-out gardeners were quite as familiar a sight to our forefathers as they are to us. The farm labourer depended on the parson and the squire for his winter coals and blankets to at least as great an extent as he will this winter. And if we turn to the more widespread destitution caused by change in fashion or a commercial crisis, we find the records of sixty years ago full of evidence of the existence of depressions at least as acute as any we suffer from to-day. The year 1842 was the culminating point of that "rebellion of the belly" which had begun three years before in the Birming-

ham and Newport riotings, and which took the form of a demand for the "People's Charter"; and throughout the whole period between 1837 and 1848 we find the Chartist movement swelling and contracting in almost exact correspondence with the acuteness of the economic distress of the people. In 1841 and 1842 things got very bad indeed. The harvest for four successive years was wretchedly deficient, and trade seemed to be coming to an end altogether. Genuine hunger strikes took place, and the staple industries of Yorkshire and the Midlands were nearly at a standstill. The cotton trade was so bad that in 1842 some bitter jester placarded Stockport with bills announcing that the whole town was to let. The sufferings of Bolton in January, 1842, are described by one of the strong men of the time in language which palpitates with anger. "Anything like the squalid misery, the slow, mouldering, putrefying death by

which the weak and feeble of the working classes are perishing here, it never befel my eyes to behold nor my imagination to conceive. And the creatures seem to have no idea of resisting or even repining. They sit down with oriental submission, as if it was God and not the landlord that was laying his hand upon them.”<sup>1</sup>

Nor was this widespread lack of employment peculiar to 1842. The following instructive diagram represents the percentage of the members of the Ironfounders’ Society in each year, from 1831 to 1896, and of the members of the London Society of Compositors in each year, from 1848 to 1896, who were fortunate enough to be in employment, and is compiled from the official statistics published by those societies. Out of the sixty-six years shown in the case of the Ironfounders’ Society, there have been no

<sup>1</sup> Colonel Perronet Thompson, in the *Sun*, 9th January, 1842.



fewer than twenty in which the average number of members unemployed has exceeded fifteen in every hundred. The worst point was reached in 1848, when a third of the members were on benefit.<sup>1</sup> In the case of the composers, on the other hand, whose society is a local one, and whose trade is for the home market only,

<sup>1</sup> The exceptional percentage of men employed in 1845, and the correspondingly exceptional depression of 1848, denote the growth and collapse of the railway mania, which had an exactly similar effect upon the employment of composers, though inability to obtain figures earlier than 1848, and the fact that those obtained relate only to the London Society, prevent this from being fully shown in the diagram. It must be borne in mind that, during the period covered by this curve, both the societies have changed from being small minorities of their trades to comprising a very large proportion of the men in them. The proportion of men on the funds would therefore be greater now than in a similar state of trade a generation ago. For perfect accuracy of comparison, also, rates, periods, and other conditions of the out-of-work benefit would have to be taken into account.



there have been only three years out of the forty-nine shown in which the average number of unemployed has exceeded fifteen per cent., and the worst year was 1870, when nineteen per cent. of the members were on benefit.<sup>1</sup> What the curve shows most graphically is that irregularity of employment due to commercial crises is no new thing.

We are, therefore, driven to the conclusion that whatever deduction from the artisan's nominal income must be made for

<sup>1</sup> The diagram is offered solely for the purpose of comparing the percentage of unemployed members in either society at one period with the percentage so unemployed in the *same* society at any other period. The two curves cannot be compared with each other, as, in addition to the fact that one relates to a national society with members engaged largely in shipbuilding for export, while the other relates to a local society with members engaged solely in home trades, the figures on which they are based are compiled on entirely different methods. Such a comparison, therefore, could not be other than very misleading.

“short time” at the present day, it is probable that a corresponding reduction would have had to be made from the nominal income in 1837. The statisticians are therefore justified in comparing the weekly wages of the two periods, however uncertain we may be as to the exact amount of the deduction which ought to be made at either of them.<sup>1</sup>

It would be beyond my province at the present time to say anything upon the serious problem which this fluctuation of employment presents to the economist and

<sup>1</sup> An even more difficult detail in the comparison is the amount of time lost in hours by workmen in so-called constant employment. Sixty years ago employment by the hour was unknown. The yearly bond was still usual among large classes ; monthly engagements were very frequent ; and, at any rate, the workman was hired for the day or the week. Now, in some trades, he seldom gets paid for quite his full week's hours, and this constant loss of dribblets of his time, whilst it does not appear even in the Trade Union records, must make a real deduction from his nominal income.

the statesman. But nothing is gained by the assertion frequently made, that it is in any sense a new problem. Rightly understood, the antiquity and persistence of the problem is only an additional reason why our statesmen ought at once earnestly to set to work to find out how to grapple with what is one of the most serious evils of our industrial organization.

### **Hours of Labour.**

But there are other things besides wages to be taken into account in considering the condition of the wage-earner, and one of the most important of these, from the point of view of civilization, is the length of the working day. I believe that the great value of any shortening of the hours of labour lies, as I have elsewhere urged,<sup>1</sup> not

<sup>1</sup> See *The Eight Hours Day*. By Sidney Webb and Harold Cox. (Walter Scott, London, 1891; 1s.)

in the absorption of the unemployed, which must, at best, be but partial and evanescent, nor yet in the raising of wages, which is uncertain, but in the increased leisure which the workman gains for life outside his work. A worker who is employed from morning till night, especially if his work is monotonous or without real intellectual dignity, suffers a subtle degradation of character. Instead of a man and a citizen, he becomes merely a "hand." I believe that nothing has so powerfully contributed towards the rise in the standard of life of our wage-earners as the general diminution which has taken place in the hours of labour. The Factory Acts were the salvation of Lancashire.

A hundred years ago the English artisan commonly worked for about seventy-two hours per week. Even this was a reduction from 1747, when in London, at any rate, the bulk of the men worked nearer seventy-five or eighty hours. A rare

pamphlet of that year gives us the hours of labour of 118 different trades in London, of which thirteen worked from 6 a.m. to 6 p.m., three from 6 to 7, sixty-one from 6 to 8, thirty-nine from 6 to 9, and two from 5 to 9.<sup>1</sup> The unregulated greed of the mill-owners in the new textile industries rapidly lengthened the working-day to fourteen and even sixteen hours. One striking feature of this period is the way in which children, usually employed at time wages, were kept at work even longer than the adult workers, among whom piecework was already prevalent. Thus, in 1831, the boys in the Northumberland mines, who were paid by the day, are said to have been kept at work for fourteen to seventeen hours a day, whilst the hewers, paid

<sup>1</sup> See *A General Description of all Trades*, etc. (London, 1747.) Copies in the Guildhall and Patent Office Libraries only. And see *The Tailoring Trade*, by F. W. Galton. (London, 1896.)



by the ton, already restricted their shifts to ten or twelve hours each.<sup>1</sup>

But by 1837 the ten hours day was becoming generally established as the normal working time of town artisans, and in 1847 the passage into law of the Ten Hours Bill made it the rule for textile operatives also. Overtime was, however, still frequently worked in many trades, and the Saturday half-holiday was, of course, yet unknown.

Since that time, Sir R. Giffen computes that the hours of labour have been reduced on an average by 20 per cent., an estimate which seems to me to be rather over the mark. Many people are misled into an optimistic complacency on this point from too exclusive consideration of the textile in-

<sup>1</sup> See *An Earnest Address and Urgent Appeal to the People of England, on behalf of the oppressed and suffering pitmen of the Counties of Northumberland and Durham.* (W. Scott, Newcastle, 1831.)



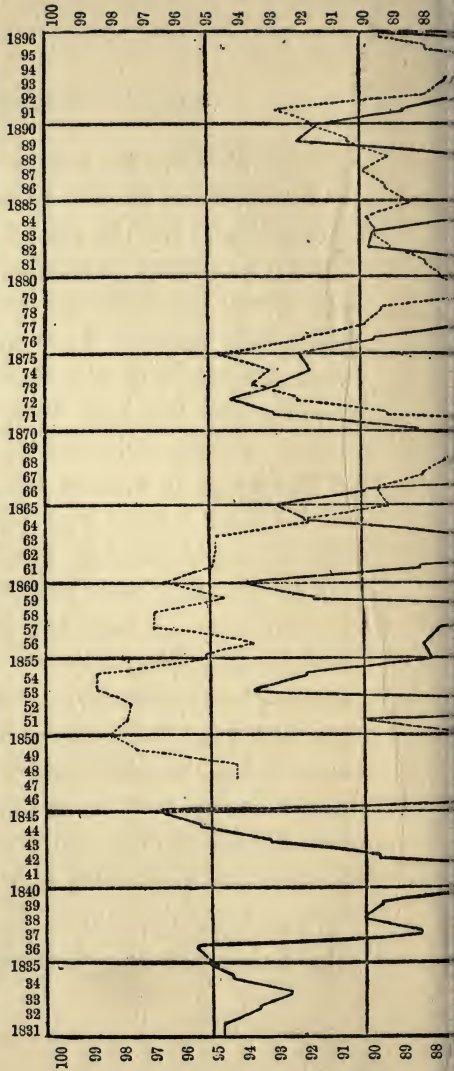
dustries, in which the hours of labour have, *by the operation of law*, been successfully reduced by at least 20 per cent. since 1830. But the beneficent protection of the Factory Acts, especially in the matter of hours, has hitherto been withheld from other workers, and the shortening of the working day has been by no means universal. I have, for instance, no statistics of the hours of railway servants in 1837, but I cannot believe that the directors in that year succeeded in getting any more out of the men they employed than did the directors of, say, the North British Railway Company, in 1889. I have elsewhere given particulars of many cases of men being *regularly* kept on duty for fifteen hours a day,<sup>1</sup> whilst instances of sixteen or twenty hours' work at a stretch are even now not uncommon. So gross became the scandal that Parliament at last plucked up

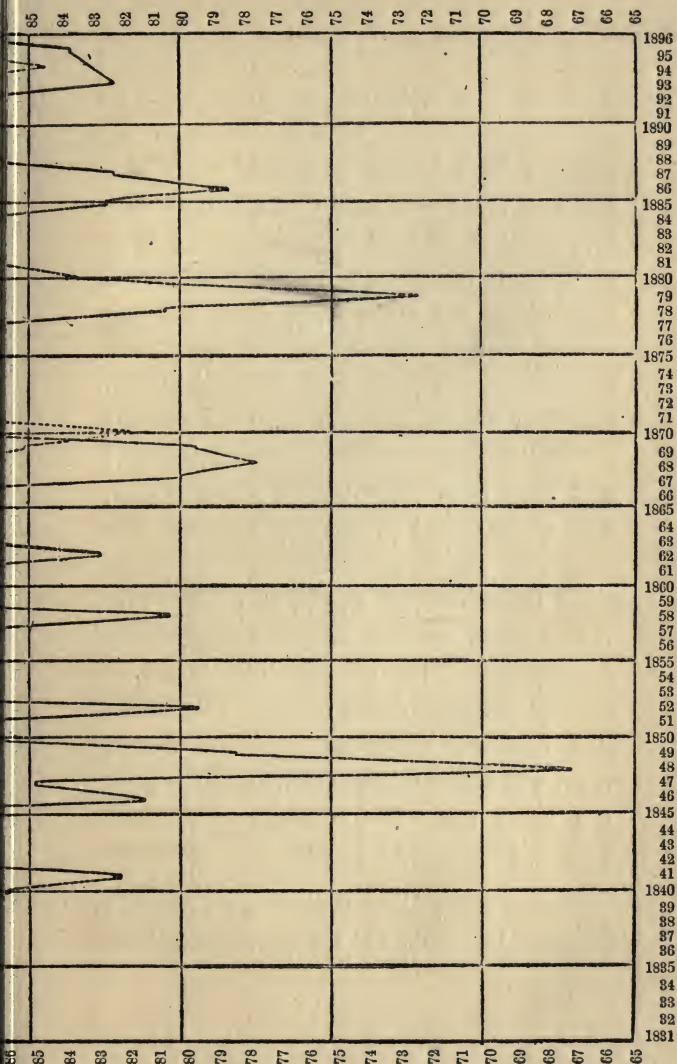
<sup>1</sup> *The Eight Hours Day*. By Sidney Webb and Harold Cox. (London : W. Scott. 1891.)

Average Percentages of the Friendly Society of Ironfounders who were in employment during each of the years 1831 to 1896 inclusive; and of members of the London Society of Compositors who were in employment in each of the years 1848 to 1896 inclusive.

[Thick black line (————): Friendly Society of Ironfounders. Dotted line (.....): London Society of Compositors.]

The figures at top and bottom of diagram denote the *years*; those at the sides, the *percentage in employment*.





courage to interfere expressly with the hours of adult men, and the Railways Regulation Act of 1892 empowers the Board of Trade to insist on a reduction of hours. Something has since been done, but the returns compiled by the railway companies themselves, and published annually by the Board of Trade, indicate that the general average among railway workers at the present time is at least twelve hours a day, with a great deal of Sunday labour. The Board of Trade apparently cannot bring itself to enforce an Eight, or even a Ten Hours Day, on the all-powerful railway companies.<sup>1</sup> Nor do the long hours of railway workers stand alone. The Bradford tramway conductor, who, in March, 1891, was found to be working regularly for 115 hours per week, would hardly agree with the optimistic conclusions as to the

<sup>1</sup> Report of the Select Committee on Railways (Hours of Labour), p. iv. (H.C., 246 ; May, 1892. Price 2s. 8d.)

reduction in the hours of labour. And there are many other classes of workers, such as shop assistants, barmen and barmaids, hospital nurses, blast furnacemen, steel workers and bakers, whose day's labour normally reaches at least twelve hours. The progress of the nation, and especially the enormous growth of town life, have indeed directly tended, in some occupations, to lengthen the hours of labour. Sixty years ago artificial lighting was neither so good nor so cheap as it has now become, and the day could not so easily be lengthened. In 1837, there were comparatively few theatres or other places of evening entertainment, and, especially in provincial towns, folks stayed in after dark and went to bed early. Abundant gas and cheap plate glass have probably lengthened the hours of shop assistants, just as the increase of evening amusements has lengthened those of barmaids, tramway servants, omnibus men,



and cabmen ; and even where, as in the case of the engineer, the normal hours of labour have in some places been reduced from sixty to fifty per week, this reduction has been largely neutralized by the prevalent practice of working overtime. It cannot be doubted that the nine hours movement, resting as it does merely on the strength of the Trade Unions, has been robbed of much of its advantage to workmen by this means, and in many crafts with nominally restricted hours, every depression of trade produces a lengthening of the hours actually worked. It is therefore difficult to come to any very optimistic conclusion as to the extent to which the hours of labour have been shortened during the last sixty years. The progress has been very partial, and large masses of workers have still to labour far more hours than is good either for them or the community. It seems evident that if we are really resolved that no worker shall be compelled to spend



his whole working life in monotonous toil, we shall have to take more energetic measures than have yet been attempted.

### **The Housing of the People.**

And if we turn from the hours of labour to the workman's dwelling, and inquire what kind of home our civilization affords him, it is equally difficult to give an optimistic answer. It is true that sixty years ago sanitation both for rich and for poor was almost unknown, and that owing to the "Municipal Socialism" of our town councils the workers have to a large extent shared in the general improvement in this respect. But in the matter of actual room accommodation the statistics of the present day reveal such deplorable shortcomings that one is tempted to declare that things could scarcely ever have been worse. The great crowding into the large towns, which has been so marked a feature of the last

sixty years, has gone far to counteract the spasmodic and partial efforts towards better housing. When the Royal Commission on the Housing of the Poor began its labours in 1884, the Commissioners turned first to a veteran philanthropist who had taken part in every movement for social improvement. Their report tells us that "the first witness who was examined, Lord Shaftesbury, expressed the opinion more than once, as the result of nearly sixty years' experience, that however great the improvement of the condition of the poor in London has been in other respects, *the overcrowding has become more serious than it ever was.* This opinion was corroborated by witnesses who spoke from their own knowledge of its increase in various parts of the town."<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> See the Report of the Royal Commission on the Housing of the Poor; *The Housing of the Poor*, by F. H. Millington (Cassell and Co.; 1s.); *The Housing of the Working Classes*, by J. Theodore

When we consider other parts of the kingdom we find conclusions which are scarcely less appalling. Much has been done in the way of improvement in various parts of Scotland, but 22 per cent. of Scottish families still dwell in a single room each, and the proportion in the case of Glasgow rises to 33 per cent. The little town of Kilmarnock, with only 28,447 inhabitants, huddles even a slightly larger proportion of its families into single-room tenements. Altogether, there are in Glasgow over 120,000, and in all Scotland 560,000 persons (more than one-eighth of the whole population), who do not know

Dodd (National Press Agency ; *id.*) ; *The London Programme*, by the present writer (Sonnenschein ; 2s. 6d. and 1s.) ; *The Housing of the Working Classes*, by E. Bowmaker (Methuen ; 2s. 6d.) ; *Municipalities at Work*, by F. Dolman (Methuen ; 2s. 6d.) ; *Municipal Government in Great Britain*, by A. Shaw (Unwin ; 6s.) ; and Fabian Tract No. 76.

the decency of even a two-roomed home.<sup>1</sup> Compare with this phase of Scottish working-class life the fact lately revealed by an elaborate inquiry into the dwelling-houses of Boston, Massachusetts, a city of 311,000 inhabitants, where rents are high. The number of families dwelling in single rooms was found to be only 1,053, or less than 1½ per cent., as against Glasgow's 33 per cent.<sup>2</sup>

Our Scottish record represents indeed some improvement, for in 1861 35 per cent. of the family groups in Scotland lived each in a single room. But the rate of improvement—at no time rapid enough—has actually slackened during the last decade. The total number of single-room families positively increased between 1861 and 1871 by over 4,000; it decreased in the next ten years by 27,000, or 11 per cent.; whilst the

<sup>1</sup> Census Returns, Scotland, 1891. (C.—6755, 1892.)

<sup>2</sup> Massachusetts Bureau of Statistics of Labour. Report for 1891, p. 567.

last decade has shown a decrease of only 18,000, or less than 9 per cent. At the present rate of progress it will take over a century to remove this disgrace to Scottish civilization.

In England no attempt was made until 1891 to collect statistics relating to the overcrowding of the people in their homes. But the census returns of that year for the first time present such statistics, and they show that while the number of one-roomed dwellings is, undoubtedly, very much smaller in England than in Scotland, yet there is an enormous amount and a very large percentage of "over-crowding" still existing in this kingdom. Out of a total of 6,131,001 separate tenements enumerated in England and Wales in 1891, 286,946, or 4.68 per cent., consisted of one room only, and these contained no fewer than 640,410 persons,<sup>1</sup> or 2.2 per cent. of

<sup>1</sup> Both the number of single-room tenements and the total number of persons living in them seem



the whole population, with the high average of 2·23 persons per room. In London 18·40 per cent. of all the tenements enumerated are one-roomed, and even this high percentage is far distanced by Plymouth, where no less than 24·40 per cent. of all the tenements are similarly one-roomed. Nor do these figures even exhaust the extent of the evils revealed. Even a two or three-roomed tenement may be disgracefully overcrowded. The Census Commissioners, who were left to give their own definition of overcrowding, concluded that "ordinary tenements which have more than two occupants per room, bed-rooms and sitting-rooms included, may safely be

much too small to correspond with impressions derived from other sources, and it is probable, as the Census Report admits, that this enumeration is inaccurate. On the other hand, the number of occupants per room of the one-roomed dwellings seems too high to be accurate, remembering the large number of single men and women occupying one-roomed homes.



considered as unduly overcrowded,"<sup>1</sup> a conclusion with which, considering the small size of the rooms in most of the tenements, few will be found to disagree. Of such homes there were enumerated in England and Wales 481,653, or 7·86 per cent. of the total number of separate tenements enumerated. In these homes lived 3,258,044 persons, or 11·23 per cent. of the total population, with an average of 2·81 persons to each *room*. The distribution of this great mass of people, officially described as living in "overcrowded" homes, is almost entirely confined to the towns (this means that the well-known bedroom overcrowding of rural cottages has still to be statistically explored), and it is observed that in some of the coal-bearing districts this crowding is very severe. In the towns

<sup>1</sup> Census of England and Wales, 1891. Vol. iv. General Report, p. 22. (C.—7222, 1893. Price 1s. 3d.) See also Booth's *Life and Labour of the People*, vols. v. to ix.

the percentage of the population inhabiting these dwellings varies from 40·78 per cent., the highest, in Gateshead, to 1·74 per cent., the lowest, in Portsmouth, London with 19·71 per cent. being about midway.<sup>1</sup>

Although, therefore, the condition of England presents some improvement upon that of Scotland in this respect, there are yet hundreds of thousands of single-room and overcrowded tenements in all our great towns, and the total number of persons in our midst to whom the elementary conditions of decent family life are unknown exceeds three millions. Here again, although the percentage of the total population is doubtless much less than in 1837, I feel some doubt whether the actual number of those in this condition is very much diminished ; and this is a point of

<sup>1</sup> For all these statistics relating to overcrowding, etc., see the Census of England and Wales, 1891, General Report, pp. 19-25. (C.—7222, 1893. Price 1s. 3d.)

supreme importance in our estimate of comparative civilization. It is nearly impossible to get good citizenship, good trade unionism, or good co-operation out of a one-roomed home. Until we can secure to these unfortunates the conditions of elementary decency, we can count upon no real progress in their civilization. I will venture to quote, on this point, the unpublished autobiography of Francis Place, the Radical Reformer, of Westminster, whose unique experience included many years of life as a journeyman breeches-maker in a one-roomed home in London, towards the end of last century.

“The consequences,” he says, “of a man and his wife living in the same room in which the man works is mischievous to them in all respects, and I here add, as a recommendation to all journeymen, tradesmen, and other workmen who are much at home, and even to those who are only at home at meal-times and after working

hours, and other times such as Sundays and when they have no employment, to make almost any sacrifice to keep possession of two rooms, however small and however inconveniently situated as regards the place of their employment. Much better is it to be compelled to walk a mile or even two miles to and from their work to a lodging with two rooms, than to live close to their work in a lodging of one room. I advise them also to arrange them contrary to the usual custom of those who have two rooms, and to put the bed in the room in which as much as possible of the domestic work is done. A neat, clean room, though it be as small as a closet, and however few the articles of furniture, is of more importance in its moral consequences than anybody seems hitherto to have supposed. The room in which we now lived was a front room at a baker's shop. The house had three windows in the front, two in the room, and one in a

large closet at the end of the room. In this closet I worked. It was a great accommodation to us ; it enabled my wife to keep the room in better order ; it was advantageous, too, in its moral effects. Attendance on the child was not as it had been always in my presence. I was shut out from seeing the fire lighted, the room washed and cleaned, and the clothes washed and ironed, as well as the cooking. We frequently went to bed, as we had but too often been accustomed to do, with a wet or damp floor, and with wet clothes hanging up in the room. Still, a great deal of the annoyance and too close an interference with each other in many disagreeable particulars (which having but one room made inevitable) were removed—happily removed for ever.”<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> The Autobiography of Francis Place, edited by Graham Wallas—to be published shortly—will throw new light on the social and political history of the century.



### Conclusion.

Space does not permit me to enlarge further on my theme. Under every heading it might be shown that, whilst the position of a large section of the wage-earners has greatly advanced since 1837, other sections have obtained little, if any, share of the general growth in wealth and civilization. If we took each department of life in turn, and fixed a datum line below which we considered that the workman could not decently live, we should find, alike in wages, hours of work, dwelling and general civilization, that the *percentage* of those who fell below the line is less now than it was in 1837. But we should discover also that the lowest level reached was quite as low as at that time, and that the *total number* falling below our assumed datum line is, in actual magnitude, probably greater than in 1837. The depth of the poverty is as great as it can ever have been; its actual breadth



even is as great or greater ; the residuum of 1837 remains, indeed, undiminished on our hands and our consciences. Under these circumstances, the fact that the more prosperous section has increased and multiplied in numbers and in wealth, whilst leaving so large a part of the community unimproved, appears to me to aggravate our responsibility in the matter. The general moral of the whole survey seems to be the need for more earnest endeavour to "level up" this residuum. The retrospect teaches us that this levelling up is possible. It has actually been accomplished as regards particular industries. The inference is that it could be equally carried out in others did we but really choose to take the appropriate means. And if I had to name one great factor in the continued industrial degradation of large sections of the community who remain in the trough of destitution, I should not hesitate to place first the demoralizing influence of what is called

the "sweating system," or, more precisely, home work.<sup>1</sup> Home work it is, with all its insidious demoralization, that keeps down the earnings of East London, of the down-trodden Sheffield trades, of the miserably paid workers in the Black Country, of women workers everywhere.<sup>2</sup> And it is instructive to notice that, just as in 1837 it was the decaying influence of eighteenth century organization that produced so much of the misery of that time, so in 1897 it is the evil effect of the obsolescent hand industry, with its small masters and isolated home labour, that is perhaps the greatest cause of indus-

<sup>1</sup> I do not forget the twin social curses of drink and gambling ; but these affect individuals in every grade of society. Home work demoralizes whole classes.

<sup>2</sup> See Fabian Tract No. 50, *Sweating: its Cause and Remedy*; and *How best to do away with the Sweating System*, by Mrs. Sidney Webb. (Co-operative Union, Manchester ; 1892. *Id.*)

trial disorganization. Not until we can thoroughly eradicate the remnants of this system from our midst can we hope to level up its unfortunate victims to the high standard of life which has been given to their more fortunate brethren by the machine industry and the world-commerce.

And if we think seriously of setting to work to lift London to the level of Lancashire, and the Black Country to the standard of Northumberland, the lesson of history is clear. Unregulated individualism it was that produced the "white slavery" of the Lancashire of 1837, and the degraded serfdom of the Northumberland collier. Our fathers dealt with the problem in these cases by replacing this industrial anarchy by the restrictions of well-considered collective control. For the headlong competition which was lengthening the hours and destroying the

health and character of the Lancashire mill hand, they substituted the Factory Acts. The heedless greed of the Northumberland coal-owner was checked by successive Mines Regulation Acts. Upon the firm basis of these ever-lengthening codes, strong Trade Unions arose still further to assert the common will. Protected by law and their Trade Union, the coal-hewers and the cotton-spinners were able to combine in yet other ways. Co-operative stores, which had hitherto failed, began to flourish;<sup>1</sup> town councils stepped in with fresh assertions of Collectivism to raise the standard of sanitation, and to minister to the common needs of urban populations; and finally it was the votes of these comparatively prosperous communities which secured for themselves and

<sup>1</sup> See *The Co-operative Movement in Great Britain*, by Beatrice Potter, 3rd edition (London; 1896).

their less fortunate brethren that tremendous development of Collectivism, our system of national education. In every department of life where any progress has taken place since 1837, we find that progress marked by an ever-growing substitution of collective rule for individual control. And just where the advance of this collective rule has been checked—in the industries jealously fenced off from effective factory legislation, in the localities from which thorough municipal institutions have been withheld—just there do we find the chief instances in which progress in civilization has been small or even non-existent. Factory legislation, trade unionism, and that combination of consumers for educational or administrative purposes which takes the form either of Municipal Socialism or the Co-operative Store, these, together with the potent engines of taxation and central administrative control, have

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been the great factors in whatever progress has been made since 1837. Our chief hope for the levelling up of the residuum must lie in the well-devised extension of these manifestations of Collectivism.





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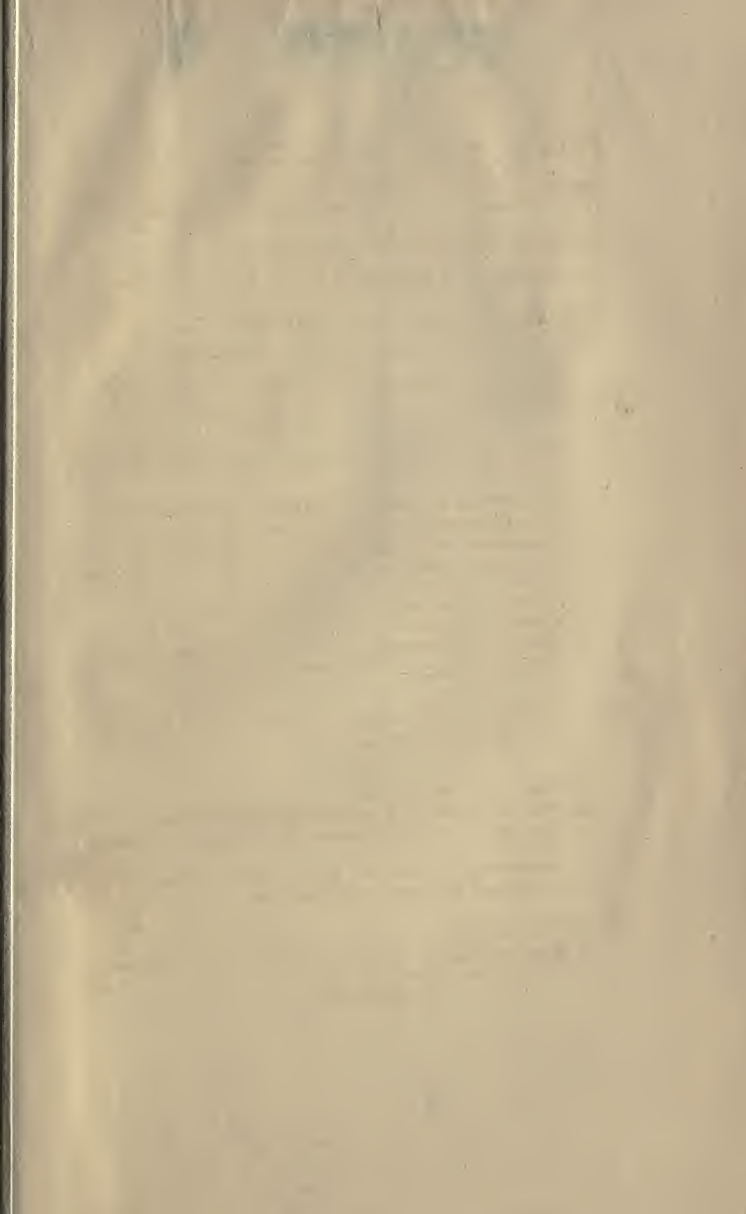
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